BACK TO REALITY
Mark 9:2-15, Exodus 32:15-24
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John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

The story is told of an affluent businessman who emerged from his office building one day feeling on top of the world, only to encounter a disheveled, unshaven, poorly clothed vagrant. The businessman was touched with compassion and in a grand gesture of generosity pulled out his wallet, handed the fellow two dollars and said, "Don't despair." The very next day he encountered the man again at the same spot. But as he approached the man waved a fistful of money at him and said, "Here's your sixteen dollars." "What are you doing?" protested the gentleman. And he replied, "You told me to put two dollars on 'Don't Despair' in the fourth race, and it hit eight to one."

Sometimes life does that to us. We feel as if we are expressing true compassion and charity and the reality of results is rather dismal. We conceive grandly in the abstract and are jolted rudely back to reality by the ambiguous complexities of life. We are better parents as we contemplate the task of parenting than we are in the heat of a family conflict. We are more eloquent in the car before the meeting than during the actual speech we will make. Beyond our best laid schemes life is never quite as precise and clear as we have assumed - and the rude and sometimes painful jolt can be quite healthy.

I had an experience myself this summer which was illustrative. One of the advantages of spending time in Princeton is the proximity and accessibility of New York City. On the weekend of the Summer Institute of Theology several of us took the bus to New York to see a few plays. We stayed in a modest hotel but on Sunday morning were invited by some others to breakfast at The Barclay. It was a bright, cool morning, breakfast at The Barclay was elegant, the lobby filled with elegant, bright people. The food was good, the conversation stimulating. From there we all walked to Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, to sit in that elegant sanctuary, hear elegant music, and an elegant sermon and to see more elegant people. Afterward it was time to return to Princeton and there is no way to walk from Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church to the Port Authority Bus Terminal without transgressing 8th Avenue and 42nd Street. There, in the most vivid contrast, was another reality...every conceivable kind of pornographic literature in shop after shop, the sidewalks filled with swaggering young men clutching wine bottles, prostitutes plying their trade, drunks passed out against the buildings. It may have been the healthiest thing that happened to us: we were certainly dragged, albeit reluctantly, down from the lofty and rarified atmosphere of breakfast at The Barclay and the Gospel on 5th Avenue to the reality of life as a lot of people live it.

There is some of that, of course, in our annual return from vacation, which is why I have chosen to preach this sermon on Labor Day weekend. For nearly three months many of us have been coming and going, our responsibilities lessened, our burdens lightened. And even those who have not been coming and going have enjoyed a softer, slower, less intense way of living. Coming back from vacation, I have learned, is more than the number of miles from the ocean to Columbus. It is a long journey emotionally and spiritually, as well as physically, but - we need now to come back to reality: to the frantic pace at which business is done and life is lived in our community. We shouldn't be blamed, really, if we regret the return and resist the come-down.

No one in history ever had a more rude awakening nor painful come-down than Moses. Let's think about his experience. The earliest theological awareness in antiquity attributed a mystical, divine quality to heights - mountain tops - the heavens. When people go up onto a mountain they are likely to meet God. And one of the richest stories of this genre in all literature is found in the Old Testament Book of Exodus. After the initial journey away from Egypt the children of Israel, with Moses as their leader, came to the wilderness of Sinai. At the mountain of that name God summoned Moses to come up for a meeting. And for twelve Chapters in the Book of Exodus the mountain top meeting between God and His man Moses continues: the covenant is affirmed and the terms spelled out - the Ten Commandments and all the laws which would govern the new nation God was fashioning out of the twelve tribes camped below. For forty days and forty nights Moses' was on the mountain with God. In terms of his own personal pilgrimage of faith, this was the pinnacle. He was a murderer, remember, and a very reluctant liberator. But now, on Mt. Sinai, he knew at last the good and gracious purposes of God and he was certain that the bold adventure out of Egypt into the wilderness would result in the establishing of God's holy nation.

At the bottom of the mountain, however, events were not nearly so lofty and inspiring. Moses wasn't gone long when the people asked Aaron to make some gods to worship and lead them through the wilderness. Aaron complied and built a golden calf, and after a liturgical nod in the direction of Moses' God, the people dove into what appears to be a fertility celebration: drinking, dancing, singing.

Meanwhile, Moses began the trek down, heart aflame with God's purposes, carrying the tablets of stone. When he saw and heard what had happened he broke the tablets, burned the golden calf, ground it into powder, scattered it on water and made the people drink it for good measure. It was quite a come-down: obviously the reality of the valley was not nearly as pleasant, inspiring or edifying as what transpired on the mountain.

Moses, however, needed the mountain experience. So do we. It is good to put distance between the daily round and self and use the interlude for reflection and renewal. We need the re-creation of recreation: the vocation of vacation: the occasional period alone on top of a mountain with self and God. We need the high moment of gorgeous music, the deep experience of worship when the elusive truth allows itself to be held for a moment. Halford Luckock advised: "Trust your high moments" and cited the good lines from Eunice Tietjens:

"But I shall go down from this airy place,
this swift, white, peace, this stinging exultation,
And time will close about me
and my soul stir to the rhythm of the daily round.
Yet having known, life will not press so close,
and always I shall feel time ravel thin about me.
For once I stood
In the white windy presence of eternity."

(Profiles from China in Interpreter's Bible Vol. 7, p.776)

In our New Testament Lesson this morning Jesus took His three most dependable friends, Peter, James and John, up onto a mountain. Something happened there which defies analysis and description. The Gospel account uses the word "transfiguration" from a Greek word which is also the root of metamorphosis. What it means is that Peter, James and John saw Jesus as He really was: saw Him clearly for who He was. Before - they weren't sure. Afterward they would continue to experience confusion and doubt. But for that moment - that "swift white stinging exultation" they knew that this carpenter Rabbi was the Christ, God's Messiah.

Most of us wait all our lives for an experience like that. And so Peter, overwhelmed, beside himself, suggested that they build three booths. He wanted, that is to say, to prolong the experience: to capture and nail it down, or at the very least, to memorialize it by way of a permanent monument. His faith had not come easily; he was a passionate, impetuous, very human disciple. When, finally, he knew the truth, he didn't want to let go: more academically, he wanted this experience to be the norm, the criterion of all reality.

It's terribly significant, I think, that Jesus did not even acknowledge Peter's suggestion. Instead He led them down from the mountain and waiting for them there was an argument, a nasty, name calling spat between some pompous religious official and His own disciples, the reason being their inability to heal a young boy with epilepsy. - From the abstract to the concrete - the sacred vision to the secular world - mountain to valley - back to reality!

It doesn't take much of a preacher to sense God's word in that. It is almost painfully obvious. Jesus leads His disciples down. He may on occasion have a meeting on the mountain, but it's immediately back to reality. It's a hard lesson to learn. Like Peter, we'd prefer to stay up there, to build a monument to that, to define all of life in terms of that.

Our culture, for instance, has spawned a cult of instant gratification, a philosophy which no one acknowledges overtly, but which is inferred in practically every commercial which flashes on the television screen. The message is simple and eloquent and immensely appealing and totally untrue. It is that the good life is the life of things - goods - the shining goal of all human aspirations; that it may be lived by all the people, all the time. If you have money you can "put it where your mouth is", purchase the proper tooth-paste and become instantly irresistible: or you can choose the right brand of wine and induce your date to stay overnight; or you can turn your marriage into domestic bliss with the proper coffee: you can earn admiring stares from every man with panty hose that don't sag, dresses that are sleek, hair that is tinted: you can transform your modest apartment into a castle with new furniture, elevate your esteem in your neighbor's eyes with a new car and nail it all down permanently with life insurance in case you aren't in the picture. And as if on cue, at the very moment you protest that you can't afford all that, you are gently assured that the yoke is easy, the burden light and that - after all - you deserve it.

The trouble is that people believe it, not only people who can afford to believe but people who cannot. And so they buy the car and furniture and all the other promises of instant gratification and find themselves in a bondage every bit as real as the days of the company store. We are understandably nervous when the lights go out in New York and thousands of people simply help themselves. Law

and order types think they know the remedy. May I suggest that at least part of the reason for this frightening behavior may be discovered if you watch television for one entire evening through the eyes of a ghetto tenement resident? May I suggest that the looter is simply a believer in the philosophy of instant gratification and no amount of law enforcement will alter the situation until the whole culture takes the long, arduous trip back to reality.

The Church, too, would prefer to stay on the mountain, away from the ambiguities of life. It's far easier to believe here than out there: it's far easier to recite our trust in Jesus Christ as Lord in the safety of a creed than in the complexity of community life. Peter's temptation to build a monument on the Mount of Transfiguration has been expressed every time the institutional church turns a deaf ear to the cry of human need, or dresses itself elegantly and turns its eyes from the naked poor all about it. Jesus led His disciples down from the mountain and a church which intends to be faithful to Him must never forget that. We need our high and holy moments of truth. We need the experiences of joy and inspiration and fulfillment. And we need to acknowledge the temptation that was Peter's. The Church of Jesus Christ is called to follow Him down - out of the booths it has built and into the valley of human need and political controversy: out of its monuments to the past and into this community wrenched with the agony of establishing justice and equality and compassion for all people. Our Lord does not acknowledge our desire to stay up and away from it all. He calls us back to reality. He also promises that He will stand with us in our valleys. That is the good and terribly relevant news. He will meet us here - but also in our low and flat plains: in our crises - our grief - our anxiety. He leads disciples down - but He also comes down to stand with us in our need.

It is a particular characteristic of our time, I believe, that religion which puts its roots in the soil of the mountain is immensely popular. We are inundated with testimony from the mountain: personal conversion experiences are the norm: churches which cultivate them, orchestrate them and celebrate them are growing. Churches which openly acknowledge the Christ who leads into the valley are rather notoriously in trouble.

But the Lord we would follow spent His whole life coming down. God, we dare to believe, sent Him down, all the way down to a humble manger, to a life lived among us fully, on down to a wretched conclusion and death on a cross. God's reality is the world of people and issues and problems and controversy. Jesus led Peter, James and John down from that glorious experience on the mountain because He wanted their faith right in the middle of that arguing crowd - and because there was a sick little boy who needed Him.

So, you and I, are called to follow. We need, and we shall have, our clear, shining moments of truth. But our salvation - our wholeness and health and ultimate joy will be found in the life of serving and helping and healing: down in the valley, in the world. Jesus Christ precedes us. He is there already. He bids us follow.

Amen.

We give thanks, our Father, for those moments when we have seen clearly and known the truth of your love. Give us courage and faith to leave them behind and follow, every day, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.